

Disney's Bambi in Mi'kmaq may help kids learn their own language

By Jennifer Ashawasegai

A visitor is surprised, then intrigued, at how the mother language is still widely used in a Mi'kmaq community on Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. Community members exchange last night's gossip in Mi'kmaq, drawing the listener into the conversation because of the beautiful lilt of the language. It doesn't matter that the language is foreign to the eavesdropper, Mi'kmaq is simply easy to listen to.

[Eskasoni](#) is a large proud Mi'kmaq community, with close to 4,000 members and just over 3,100 of those members live on the First Nation, located along the coast of Sydney Harbour. Eskasoni is also a prosperous community to the eye, and boasts its own tourism association, economic development office, power and energy, health care, education and social development, gaming, tobacco, membership, cultural, housing and fisheries departments.

The visitor who hears the people speak the language around the dinner table listens to fluid and eloquent Mi'kmaq. The visitor learns the language is very strong in Eskasoni, but not in other communities, and is shocked to hear people such as Albert Marshall, an Eskasoni Elder and advising Elder to Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UNIR) say there are not many people who speak Mi'kmaq anymore.

Marshall quickly says, "Well, Mi'kliskh doesn't count." He means the combination of both English and Mi'kmaq does not count as speaking the language fluently. He says of about 40,000 Mi'kmaq people in the Maritimes and Maine all together, only about 25 per cent can still speak the language fluently.

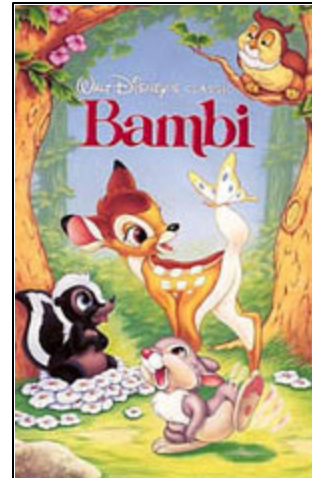


Photo courtesy of Walt Disney Studios

Marshall says one of the ways to keep the Mi'kmaq language intact for the younger ones is through a video. He says a group of people have formally requested permission from [Walt Disney Studios](#) to translate Bambi into Mi'kmaq.

That dream has belonged to Marshall's wife, Murdena for the last 18 years. Murdena Marshall, Eskasoni Elder, semi-retired Professor, and winner of a Native Role Model Award eight years ago for promoting the language, has been championing this cause for the better part of her life.

She says, "Mi'kmaq has lasted this long because the sheer numbers of people there have been able to keep the language intact, as opposed to the unfortunate Mi'kmaq communities south of the border in Maine."

She says she's "afraid that if the Mi'kmaq language dies in the Maritimes, there's nowhere else to go to learn it."

And her husband adds people can't rely on the government or any educational institutions to help retain Mi'kmaq language, because it is their own responsibility. He says they have partnered up with UINR and some colleagues of Murdena Marshall at the University College of Cape Breton for "project Bambi".

Murdena Marshall says she first initiated the project almost 20 years on her own, without any help. She tried off and on independently but to no avail. She says she wasn't aware of any of the ways to get the attention of right department at the Walt Disney Studios. Now since partnering with the two other groups, the paperwork is all in and waiting for the go-ahead.

Albert Marshall agrees and says, "We're just a few weeks away from getting the permission. We have all of our actors in place and everything."

One drawback to the plan though, is the feasibility of the small Mi'kmaq project. Will Walt Disney Studios give permission to translate the Bambi video, plus hand over the score for a small handful of people? 40,000 people are not many compared to the entirety of a Walt Disney audience. Will the Mi'kmaq version make money for the large corporation? Will it be considered more of a charity and good will thing to do? What will distribution entail?

Albert Marshall did not have the answers, and admits to not looking that far ahead. As he says, "We're just focusing on getting the permission right now before we think of anything else."

He also has other ideas to appeal to the younger, gadget-loving generation to help learn and retain Mi'kmaq. "It's still in the very early development stages, but I want to see a hand-held Mi'kmaq translator, like a palm pilot, and to also play some of the traditional games on." He says, "These are ideas to promote, preserve and enhance Mi'kmaq".

And the language is also a love of Murdena Marshall's, as she dedicated many years to promoting and installing it in the school system over 25 years ago. The dynamic Elder says, "It's my dream for all the kids to speak Mi'kmaq and with the kids hearing the video, even if they don't know the language, it will become familiar to them and make it easier for them to understand".

She adds, "God gave us this language. When I face my Creator I will speak Mi'kmaq."